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TAGS: ECON EU PGOV FR ELAB SOCI

SUBJECT: EU REFERENDUM: FRENCH POLLSTERS ASSESS TREND
TOWARDS 'NO' IN MOST RECENT POLLS

REF: A. (A) PARIS 2006

- 1B. (B) PARIS 1998
1C. (C) PARIS 1856
1D. (D) PARIS 1833 (E) PARIS 1649 (F) PARIS 1230 (G)
PARIS 1014

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: After two recent polls showed that a majority of those who had decided would reject the EU Constitution in a May 29 referendum, we met with pollsters to get their assessment of this trend. We wanted to determine if the change was just a passing phase related to recent events, or whether the increasingly sour public mood has deeper, more enduring roots. The pollsters agreed that President Chirac and the Raffarin government enjoy very little confidence among ordinary voters. In addition, these experienced observers of public opinion identify a deep rejection of the political elite by voters and anger at the way ordinary citizens have long been excluded from decisions relating to Europe. END SUMMARY.

RECENT POLLS REVEAL GROWING STRENGTH OF THE "NO" VOTE

12. (U) Until the first week of March, all polls in France projected that the proposed EU Constitution would pass by a comfortable margin in the May 29 referendum. Then, on March 10 a general strike saw at least 500,000 demonstrators take to the streets throughout France to protest low salaries and proposed reforms of the 35-hour work week and education system (refs D and E). The strike and social discontent came on the heels of a scandal involving extravagant taxpayer-provided housing for the finance minister (ref F). To this was added the controversy over the EU's "Bolkestein Directive", which proposed to allow more cross-border competition in the European services sector (ref C). In addition, the public debate about the proposed Constitution kicked off in earnest as the political parties cranked up their pro and con campaigns (refs B and G). Following these events, the CSA polling organization published a poll which, for the first time, showed that a majority of decided voters planned to vote no. According to the March 18 CSA reading, decided voters would reject the proposed Constitution by a margin of 51 to 49 percent, with 53 percent of potential voters abstaining or undecided. The same poll only two weeks prior showed that decided voters favored the proposed Constitution by a comfortable 65 to 35 percent margin. On March 21, another polling organization, IPSOS, published numbers which also reflected a marked trend towards 'no' among decided voters, this time by a margin of 52 to 48 percent. The prior IPSOS poll, taken some two weeks earlier, showed a clear 60/40 lead for 'yes' supporters. Two subsequent polls have confirmed the trend toward rejection of the constitution.

IPSOS DIRECTOR GENERAL GIACOMETTI

13. (SBU) PolOff and visiting INR analyst met with IPSOS general director Pierre Giacometti on March 21 to discuss the results of IPSOS' most recent poll and the outlook for the coming campaign. According to Giacometti, in his 20 years of polling experience, he had never witnessed such a "brutal" change in public opinion in such a short span of time. Giacometti said that changes in opinion reflected in the two polls (CSA and IPSOS) were so unexpected that they had "changed the climate of the entire campaign, making anything possible, including a 'no' victory." He also pointed out one significant difference with the 1993 campaign for the Maastricht Treaty which passed by referendum in France by a narrow 51.5 to 48.5 percent margin. Many commentators claim the Maastricht experience provides a model for a 'yes' victory in the current contest. In the 1993 campaign, the polls initially showed a significant advantage for proponents of the treaty. Later, the polls narrowed to a fifty-fifty dead heat, but only during the final two weeks of the campaign. The present case is different, Giacometti believes, because the polls have narrowed to fifty-fifty some ten weeks out from referendum day, presumably revealing the hidden strength of the 'no' vote.

14. (C) Giacometti also pointed to an "unstable electorate" -- one which no longer lines up along the classic left-right spectrum -- as another potential source of strength for the 'no' vote. "People no longer listen to their political leaders," Giacometti said, citing as evidence the first round results of the 2002 presidential campaign. In that contest Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extreme-right National Front (FN) party, placed second behind Jacques Chirac, knocking Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin out of the race.

"The people voted for Le Pen in 2002 to protest 'business as usual' in French politics. After that experience, they could vote for anybody or anything," Giacometti opined. On the other hand, Giacometti admitted that ten weeks remained in the campaign and 'a swing in public opinion in one direction could be offset by a swing in the opposite direction.'

"Chirac holds the key," Giacometti concluded. "If he engages himself actively in the campaign, like Mitterrand did in 1993, and if he can find a theme which raises the tenor of the debate above the base desire to register a protest vote against the government, then the EU Constitution might be approved after all." NOTE: President Chirac, in remarks to press after the European Summit (ref A), touched on what is likely to be the key theme of his pro-yes campaign: that voting no is un-patriotic because a 'no' victory would deal a grievous blow to France's leadership role in Europe. END NOTE.

15. (C) Assessing the motivations of both 'yes' and 'no' voters, Giacometti observed that those planning to vote 'yes' in the referendum will not get immediate feedback for their participation. "Even if they win," Giacometti said, "the next morning, they will wake up and realize nothing has changed. Unemployment will still be 10 percent, globalization will threaten their jobs, the economy will be stagnant, consumer prices will still be rising, and the political class will continue to remain aloof from the problems of the common citizen." By contrast, Giacometti noted, "those voting 'no' will see an immediate effect. In the morning they will wake up, read their newspapers and discover they have thrown the entire EU Project into turmoil -- an immediate feedback resulting from their participation."

Another factor strengthening the 'no' vote, Giacometti believes, is the sheer length and complexity of the constitution itself. "No one will spend their weekend reading the document before voting," Giacometti said. "And even if they try, they'll soon give up. In this context, voting 'no' is the easy, default decision to make."

CSA DIRECTOR CAYROL

16. (C) PolOff and visiting INR analyst met with CSA general director Roland Cayrol on March 23. Cayrol identified President Chirac's hesitant approach to reform as the principal source of public discontent which could lead to a rejection of the EU Constitution by French voters. Cayrol claimed that a majority of the French population not only recognizes the need for change, but in fact desires it. "The people will accept reform," Cayrol said, "but only so long as the pain is distributed evenly. They are ready for change and want to get on with it, but they also know the political class is holding them back." Cayrol believes it was a major political miscalculation for President Chirac to undertake a slow approach to reform following the 2002 elections. "The people want reform, but they also want it over and done with.

What they can't stand is having it done little-by-little, so that every year the government comes back to them with a new round of mini-reforms," Cayrol said.

17. (SBU) Like other observers, Cayrol also reviewed the familiar litany of reasons for the rise of the 'no' vote. "It's not just another strike or mass demonstration," Cayrol said. "It's a summation of things: the Socialists don't want to have to support Chirac a third time -- first, in the second round of the 2002 presidential election (in Chirac's run-off against far-right candidate Le Pen), and second, in supporting Chirac's opposition to the U.S. over the war in Iraq. As for the people, they're tired of seeing prices rise while their salaries stagnate. They fear unemployment, globalization and the movement of French companies overseas. They're mad about French companies making record profits and the rising stock market. They were disgusted by the Gaymard affair (ref F). They want to thumb their noses at Brussels for pushing the Bolkestein directive on them (ref C). The people's calculation is," Cayrol summarized, "we are pro-EU but the European project will continue in any case. Hence, a 'no' vote carries no risk."

18. (C) According to Cayrol, Prime Minister Raffarin made a major mistake when he signaled he was prepared to make concessions following the general strike and mass demonstrations on March 10 (ref D). "When Raffarin conceded to the unions," Cayrol said, "then he was cooked. From that moment forward, the protesters said to themselves, 'Hey, going on strike works. Let's push for more.'" Given his lack of credibility, Raffarin will make a poor advocate for

the Constitution. Cayrol claimed that his polling organization had discovered that the moment the Prime Minister appears on TV, the public immediately starts channel surfing. As for President Chirac, "the more he involves himself in the campaign, the more the referendum will be a vote about his term in office. And that's a sure route to a 'no' vote," Cayrol said. "It's also certain that the opinions of extreme voters on the left and right cannot be swayed, Cayrol continued, though it's likely that most UMP voters will either vote 'yes' or abstain."

19. (C) Hence, the only way the "yes" vote can still carry the day, Cayrol believes, is for Socialist Party leader Francois Hollande to undertake a campaign which touches on center-left voters' lingering feelings of guilt about voting 'no.' "Hollande should conduct a sly campaign," Cayrol proffered, "in effect asking center-left voters if voting no is a 'reasonable' thing to do." If Hollande -- along with Francois Bayrou, leader of the centrist UDF political party -- can convince enough voters that Europe is part of the future and France will be left behind if it votes no, then the EU Constitution will be approved on referendum day, Cayrol concluded.

COMMENT

10. (C) The May 29 referendum is still over two months away. There will be a surfeit of further polls about voter intentions between now and then. Clearly, popular discontent ("la grogne" as the French call it) has completely upset the political elite's assumption that the proposed Constitution would pass 'as a matter of course.' The problem for supporters of the constitution is that, so far, only the French elite is defending it. There is no popular 'yes' movement. If the diverse and unorganized opposition begins to coalesce around a central theme of rejection and protest, the snowball effect for 'no' suggested by poll results may sweep aside everything in its path. END COMMENT.

LEACH